

NCA
VOC FOR IOP./FN
NEWS ANALYSIS 1-1458
CHARLES MEDD

SEPTEMBER 16, 1976

ELECTION '76: THE DEBATES -- 1960 AND 1976

ANNCR:

THE FIRST OF THREE TELEVISED DEBATES BETWEEN THIS YEAR'S PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES IS NOW JUST ONE WEEK AWAY (SEPT. 23). AS EXPECTED, THE UPCOMING ENCOUNTERS HAVE INVITED COMPARISON WITH THE SIMILAR DEBATES OF NINETEEN SIXTY BETWEEN RICHARD NIXON AND JOHN KENNEDY. CHARLES MEDD HAS THESE OBSERVATIONS.

VOICE:

THE PAST FEW DAYS AMERICAN TELEVISION AND THEATER AUDIENCES HAVE ENJOYED A NOSTALGIC FLASHBACK TO NINETEEN SIXTY AS THEY WATCHED AGAIN THE CELEBRATED NIXON-KENNEDY DEBATES. FOR MOST OF US, SEVERAL IMPRESSIONS STAND OUT: HOW MUCH THE FOREIGN POLICY ISSUES HAVE CHANGED -- CONCERN OVER THE SO-CALLED MISSILE GAP OR THE CHINESE OFFSHORE ISLANDS OF QUENHOY AND MATSU NOW SEEM STRANGELY DATED -- AND HOW THE DOMESTIC ISSUES OF THAT PERIOD -- UNEMPLOYMENT, PRODUCTION, HOUSING -- REMAIN NAGGINGLY FAMILIAR. STILL ANOTHER IMPRESSION, PERHAPS THE MOST IMPORTANT ONE, IS THAT IT'S STILL NOT CLEAR WHO WON THE DEBATES, DESPITE THE CONVENTIONAL VIEW OF SIXTEEN YEARS AGO THAT FAVE THE EDGE TO KENNEDY. WHAT IS CLEAR IS THAT CONTENT SEEMED FAR LESS IMPORTANT THAN CHARACTER OR PERSONALITY AND THAT TELEVISION IS A SUPERB MEDIUM FOR DEFINING THESE HUMAN QUALITIES.

IN MANY WAYS, THE COMING DEBATES RESEMBLE THOSE OF NINETEEN SIXTY. THE FORMAT HAS BEEN SLIGHTLY ALTERED -- THERE WILL BE THREE DEBATES THIS TIME INSTEAD OF FOUR, BUT EACH WILL RUN LONGER NINETY MINUTES INSTEAD OF ONE HOUR. ONCE MORE, QUESTIONS WILL COME FROM A SELECTED GROUP OF REPORTERS, AND EACH CANDIDATE WILL BE GIVEN A BRIEF TIME TO REBUT HIS OPPONENT'S REPLY. AND AGAIN,

THE DEBATES WILL BE BROADCAST IN THEIR ENTIRETY BY THE NATION'S LEADING TELEVISION AND RADIO NETWORKS ENSURING A MASS AUDIENCE OF VOTERS.

VALID COMPARISONS CAN BE MADE OF THE CANDIDATES AS WELL. AS VICE PRESIDENT, RICHARD NIXON HAD TO DEFEND THE EIGHT-YEAR RECORD OF A REPUBLICAN ADMINISTRATION, MUCH AS PRESIDENT FORD WILL HAVE TO DEFEND HIS OWN TWO-YEAR STEWARDSHIP OF THE WHITE HOUSE. IN NINETEEN SIXTY, JOHN KENNEDY -- A UNITED STATES SENATOR FROM MASSACHUSETTS -- HAD WON THE DEMOCRATIC NOMINATION OVER THE OBJECTIONS OF PARTY LIBERALS, AS DID JIMMY CARTER EARLIER THIS YEAR. LIKE KENNEDY, MISTER CARTER IS THE LESSER KNOWN CANDIDATE WHO MUST CONVINCE AN UNFAMILIAR AUDIENCE OF HIS PRESIDENTIAL QUALIFICATIONS.

AND, IN STILL ANOTHER PARALLEL, THE DEMOCRATIC CHALLENGER IS PROMISING PROGRESS -- A PROMISE HIS REPUBLICAN OPPONENTS SAY, AS THEY DID WITH KENNEDY THAT LACKS A SPECIFIC BLUEPRINT.

THREE NINETY-MINUTE DEBATES WILL NOT OF COURSE PROVIDE EVERY AMERICAN VOTER WITH A CLEAR ANSWER AS TO WHETHER GERALD FORD SHOULD REMAIN IN OFFICE, OR BE REPLACED BY JIMMY CARTER. THERE ARE THOSE IN FACT WHO BELIEVE THE TELEVISED FORMAT PLACES TOO MUCH EMPHASIS ON PERSONALITY, TOO LITTLE ON POLICY POSITIONS, SO THAT WHAT'S SAID IS LESS IMPORTANT THAN HOW IT'S SAID. BUT DESPITE THESE AND OTHER RESERVATIONS, THE DEBATES -- AFTER A SIXTEEN YEAR ABSENCE -- ARE ABOUT TO BEGIN, AND FOR BETTER OR WORSE THEY MAY WELL SHAPE THE ELECTION OUTCOME.

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